



Educating medical writers: A personal history

by Stephen de Looze

Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately, in England, education produces no effect whatsoever.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Ignorance may be bliss, not only in England, but after I memorably began my first day as a medical writer in Germany on April Fool's Day 1985 by falling asleep at a departmental meeting because I couldn't even begin to follow the discussions, I realized that there was more to my new job than having my own office, a personal assistant, and business cards emblazoned with 'Medical Writer'. Fortunately, I've not had to apply for another job since then, and having weathered briefly the nickname 'medical sleeper', I set about trying to understand just what I had let myself in for. Education was of course the key.

Like many new medical writers up to the present day, I had moved into my job from academia where I had been a research biochemist and, as a native English speaker in Freiburg, Germany, unofficial faculty publication writer. For the latter task, my main resource had been a book called *Scientific Writing for Graduate Students*, a slim volume published in 1969 by the Council of Biology Editors that I had acquired as an undergraduate in Oxford. Strange as it sounded to some of my friends and family, I decided being crouched at a desk was preferable to being crouched at a spectrophotometer. So, albeit in a state of blissful ignorance, I jumped at the chance to exchange my lab coat for casual business wear, double my salary overnight, and acquire more than a semblance of a steady career path.

When I began my new job, I discovered to my alarm that I was the only medical writer far and wide. Fortunately the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) provided a lifeline. I joined AMWA during my first week, indeed while still a medical sleeper. A few months later found me on North American soil for the first time—in Montreal, as it happened—and my first experience of the North American way of conferencing. My education as a medical writer had truly begun. There was no escape (even had I wanted) from the natural American communicativeness, much enhanced by the fact that this was a conference of professional communicators: alongside workshops and discussion panels, there were networking lunches and breakfasts, and even pre-breakfast 'running with AMWA' sessions. Simply being together with hundreds of others calling themselves 'medical writer' was almost an education in itself.

One of the most interesting early lessons was to discover that much of what, in my writing, I had been doing instinctively was in fact the 'AMWA-approved' way. That certainly lessened my fear of being discovered to be the impostor that I thought I must be (a feeling that took me quite a while to shake off). Of course I learned a great deal too, proudly acquiring AMWA core curriculum certificates in 1987 and 1989 and later, an advanced certificate in 1996.

My employer had been unstintingly generous in allowing me to go off year after year to the USA and Canada to attend AMWA meetings. When, however, I was asked to begin a medical writing function in 1989, and build a group, the question immediately arose as to how to organise training for my new colleagues. Slowly but surely, the travel money was drying up, and I realized that there would be logistical problems if most of my new department trotted off en bloc to AMWA meetings every autumn. It wasn't only a question of training per se (I could, and did, pass on what I had learned to my staff), but of the professional self-identity and confidence that were also necessary tools for medical writers working in teams where others—physicians, statisticians, clinical research associates and so on—took their own professionalism for granted. I was very aware of this aspect of education while carving out a role for myself that was something more than the 'glorified secretary' in the team. I knew the importance of being earnestly part of a professional organisation.

There had always been a sprinkling of Europeans at the AMWA conferences. Before long, we had got to know one another and, with the help and support of some notable europhile AMWA members (who support EMWA to this day as workshop leaders), we were talking about the possibility of setting up a European arm (or 'chapter') of AMWA—this didn't sound as absurd as it now may, because there was already a Canadian chapter, which had indeed hosted my first AMWA conference in Montreal. And so EMWA has grown as an independent association from these humble beginnings, from half a dozen people meeting in a hotel room in the USA to nearly a thousand members spread across Europe and beyond, as you can read in the article in this issue by Geoff Hall (see page 8). After thus helping EMWA on its way, I decided to step back so that the medical writers in my group would have a forum to grow and develop without the boss breathing down their necks—and indeed, no less than three EMWA

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Past Presidents, half a dozen workshop leaders and other contributors are past or present members of my department.

I wasn't to be let off the hook so easily, however. Barry Drees asked me to contribute to a discussion forum at the sixth EMWA conference in Edinburgh, 1997. *Principii obstat!* I have been giving workshops at every conference since number eight in Copenhagen, 1999; in 2000, Julia Cooper invited me to join the Education Committee, when the EMWA Professional Development Committee (EPDC) was launched at the tenth EMWA conference in Dublin. The year after that I was elected to be the second Education Officer, following in Julia's pioneering footsteps. Having ceased my AMWA activities in 1998 (I had briefly become an AMWA workshop leader too), I had finally found my calling as an official, 'EMWA-approved' educator of medical writers.

The EPDC marked a new milestone in EMWA's growth as a training organisation for medical writers. By offering accreditation and ensuring a high standard of workshops, EMWA—through the work of the EPDC—was strengthening its importance as the professional home for medical writers working in Europe and further afield. Working on the EPDC with other hugely dedicated (and, in many cases, much more knowledgeable) trainers of medical writers has been a tremendously rewarding experience for me. After my term as Education Officer came to an end in 2003, the baton was carried under the expert leadership of Wendy Kingdom and Virginia Watson, before I took up the challenge once more last year. We have been able to develop and shape the EMWA Professional Development

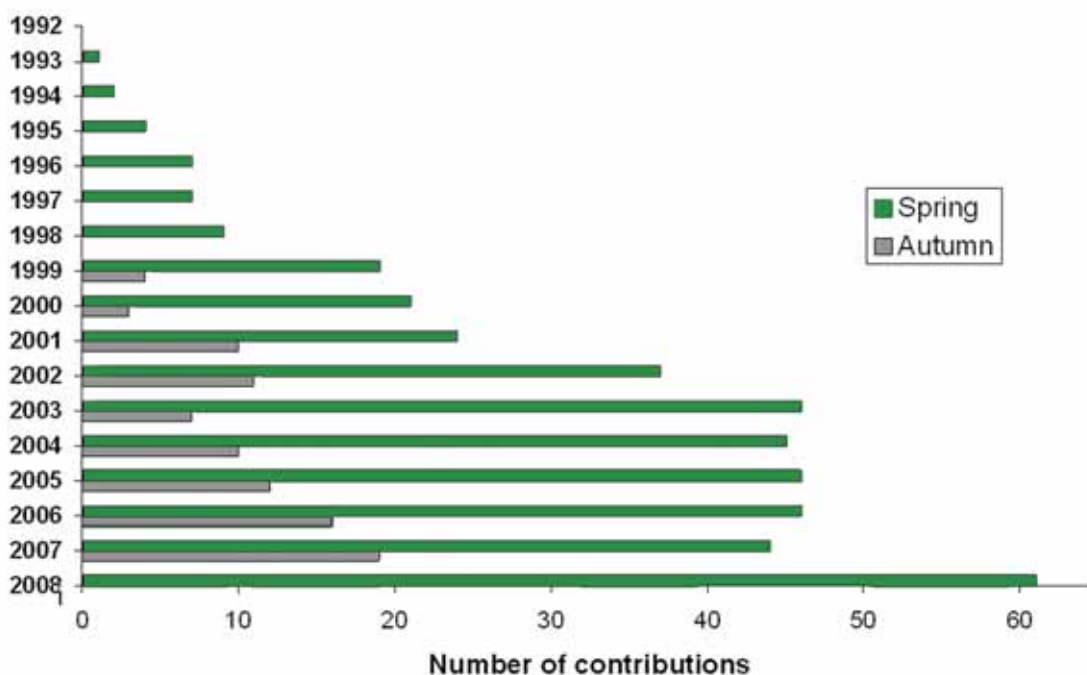
Programme (EPDP) to suit the membership of EMWA, and to keep pace with the professional growth of our own members. Early in 2005 Beate Wieseler and I chiselled out the foundation and advanced level programmes from the rapidly expanding but still amorphous EPDP. This 'new look' EPDP was launched in May 2005 at the 20th EMWA conference in Malta.

With much support from the EPDC, I also developed what might be called a Standard Operating Procedure for developing and running workshops, the Workshop Leaders Handbook, together with a set of templates (as behoves any self-respecting SOP). When I received an email a couple of years ago from AMWA's education officer praising the Workshop Leaders Handbook and hoping that something similar would be developed by AMWA, I knew that the EPDP had really come of age. All this notwithstanding, the quality of the training offered by EMWA rests squarely on the shoulders of its impressive roll-call of world class workshop leaders, and it is especially satisfying to read in a job vacancy notice posted to EMWA's website by the National Health Service in the UK: "*European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) accreditation is desirable.*"

Using my venerable collection of old EMWA brochures and minutes of the early meetings, I am now able to chronicle the growth of EMWA's workshop programme, and quantify the contribution of workshop leaders.

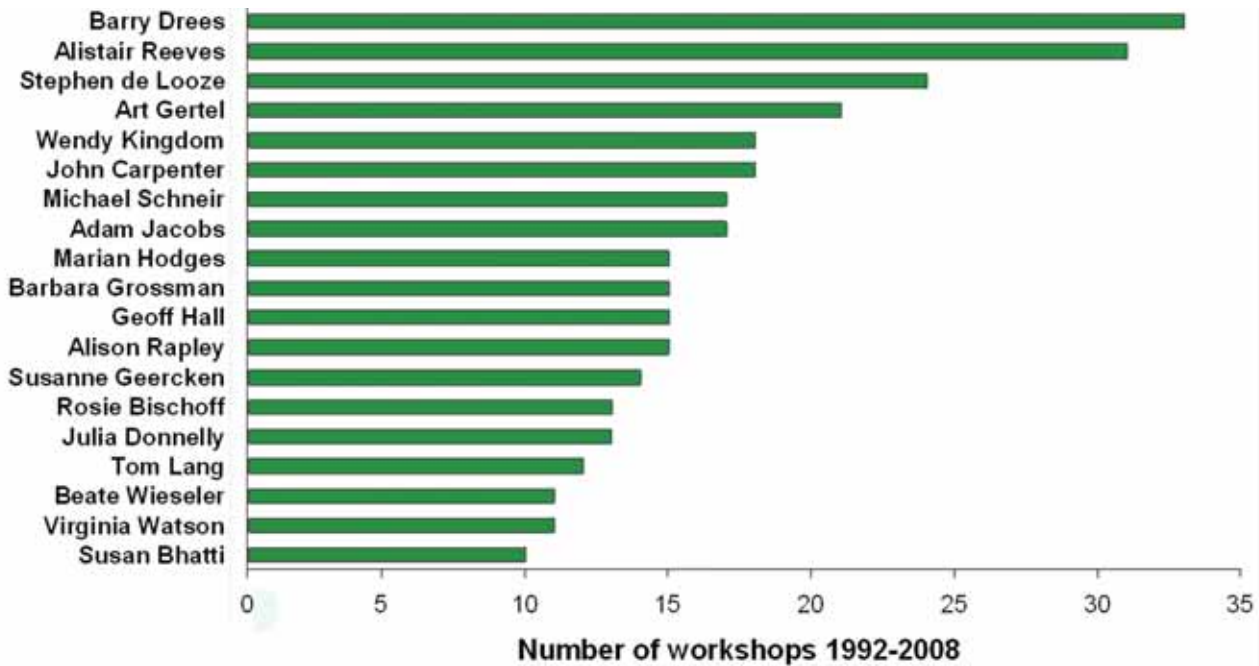
Figure 1 shows the number of workshop leader contributions to each of the 26 conferences to date (including the forthcoming conference in Barcelona). Some workshop

Figure 1: Workshop leader contributions



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Figure 2: Leaders of at least ten workshops



leaders conduct several workshops in one conference, and some workshops have joint leaders. Therefore neither the number of workshops nor the number of workshop leaders gives the full story. The numbers graphed in Figure 1 count each contribution by a workshop leader at every conference since number one in 1992. From 2000 onwards (the launch of the EPDP), only the EPDP workshops are included in these statistics, though there has been a parallel steady growth in non-EPDP events too.

Figure 2 shows the workshop leaders who have given at least ten workshops since the beginnings of EMWA (only EPDP workshops counted from 2000).

No-one can fail to be impressed by the splendid conference brochure and weighty programme of the forthcoming 26th EMWA conference in Barcelona. A record-breaking number of EPDP workshops are accompanied by a record-breaking number of other discussion forums and seminars that all contribute to medical writer education in the broadest sense. The introduction of themed conferences by Julia Forjanic Klapproth has provided momentum to this growth. As in the past, many of the extra-curricular presentations in Barcelona will no doubt be transformed into new EPDP workshops, and so the scope of the professional development programme continues to widen to keep pace with the diversification of EMWA's membership.

I think that this leaves no doubt about the importance, earnestness and vigour of EMWA's role in educating medical writers now and into the future. As summed up by another of my famous compatriots, in less cynical mode and a hundred years after Oscar Wilde:

It's all to do with the training: you can do a lot if you're properly trained.

Queen Elizabeth II. BBC1 Television documentary (6th February 1992).

And she should know!

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Past and Present Members of the EMWA Professional Development Committee

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